

Mike Bloomfield, reluctant guitar hero.

by Peter Stone Brown

Mike Bloomfield burst upon the music scene in a major way in 1965, first on Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* and a short time later on the debut of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Actually, I first heard him earlier in the year playing piano on John Hammond's *So Many Roads* recorded the year before, where upon hearing Robbie Robertson, he offered to play piano and would later find out he was also on a few Delmark and Takoma blues albums playing behind various country blues singers such as Sleepy John Estes.

To say the Bloomfield's guitar playing redefined the role of guitar in blues and eventually in rock is not an overstatement. He played superfast in extended note bending runs that inspired just about every guitar player who heard him to sit down and start figuring out his licks. But it wasn't just his speed and dexterity, there was thought and emotion and most of all soul behind his playing. In the case of his work with Dylan, it was clear that he listened to and responded to the lyrics and it wasn't only about speed and runs. Check out his playing on "It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry" and "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" for examples of his more subtle work.

Bloomfield's life is chronicled in Ed Ward's revised and expanded *Michael Bloomfield: The Rise and Fall of An American Guitar Hero* (Chicago Review Press). Ward has an easygoing, matter of fact style of writing that's never too formal and doesn't get bogged down in unnecessary tedium. Using his own interviews with Bloomfield, along with interviews by others, as well as accounts from Bloomfield's brother, his wife, friends and fellow musicians, he tells the ultimately sad story in a way that keeps you reading.

Mike Bloomfield came from a wealthy Chicago family. His domineering father who never understood him owned a restaurant supply company and made a fortune by inventing the glass and metal sugar dispensers that were common in restaurants for a good part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bloomfield never hid his wealth, or that he was Jewish. He his brother were given guitars around the time Bloomfield was 12 and it wasn't long before music was all he cared about. He was thrown out of school, sent to a New England prep school, and kicked out of that. One of the early revelations of the book is that though Bloomfield played guitar right-handed, he was actually left-handed. Another revelation is that though Bloomfield is often that of as a guy who helped destroy the folk scene (with Dylan at Newport), he actually was a folkie which explains the acoustic tracks he cut for John Hammond in

1964 that begin the box set, *From His Head To His Heart To His Hands*, that Columbia Legacy issued in 2014.

He started working in his uncle's pawn shop selling guitars and made his way to the rough and tumble world of the Southside Chicago blues clubs, where even though he was underage, musicians like Muddy Waters would bring him onstage to sit in. Unlike fellow musicians Paul Butterfield and Nick Gravenites who were also starting to haunt the same clubs, Bloomfield didn't find it necessary to carry a gun. He started looking for and discovering the older country blues musicians like Big Joe Williams, and became an entrepreneur booking bars and coffee shops and the book includes a few crazy stories about traveling with Williams and other singers.

Bloomfield was also noticed by Bob Koester of Delmark Records, who started using Bloomfield on sessions and another friend got a tape to John Hammond Sr. who signed Bloomfield to Epic Records.

In April of 1963, Bob Dylan played a club in Chicago, The Bear. Bloomfield who had Dylan's first album (his second, *Freewheelin'* wasn't out yet) attended the show, guitar in hand hoping to confront Dylan and cut him. Instead he found a friendly welcoming Dylan who charmed him and they sat around jamming on old folk songs. While it's possible Dylan attended the sessions for John Hammond Jr.'s *So Many Roads*, a year later, two years later Dylan invited Bloomfield to Woodstock to work on the songs that would become *Highway 61 Revisited*. Al Kooper was a guitarist who was invited by producer Tom Wilson to watch the sessions. He went, hoping to play guitar, but when Bloomfield walked carrying a Telecaster without a case, wiped off the rain and plugged in and started playing, Kooper gave up that idea immediately. Later on when Paul Griffin left the organ to play piano, Kooper saw his chance and admits that it was a good thing the organ was turned on because otherwise I would've been busted. During playback Dylan told Wilson to turn up the organ, and Wilson said, "The cat's not even an organ player." Dylan shot back, "Don't tell me who is or isn't an organ player." At the next session, there was a different producer Tom Wilson. If there's one fault to this book, Ward gives short shrift to the sessions, only mentioning that all the takes have been released. He doesn't mention that on one of the takes, Dylan improvises a verse about Bloomfield and at other times lets it be known his mind is totally blown by Bloomfield's playing. Dylan wanted Bloomfield to join his band, but Bloomfield's first love was the blues and he decided to stay with Paul Butterfield, a band he had only recently joined.

Butterfield's second album was named after and built around a jam Bloomfield had developed and the band has been working on in clubs,

“East-West,” a veritable musical trip around the world that was like nothing any blues band had previously attempted. I was lucky enough to see the Butterfield Band in concert at New York’s Town Hall not long after the album’s release and the concert was everything one could hope for and Bloomfield simply sensational.

However, Bloomfield quickly discovered he didn’t like touring and there were problems in the band. The other guitarist who had been the lead guitarist until Bloomfield came along Elvin Bishop resented and hated him, and Butterfield took the majority of their performance money for himself, causing the band to walk out of a gig in Los Angeles.

Bloomfield quit and announced he was forming a new band, a band that would play every type of American music. The band which included two friends from Chicago, singer and songwriter Nick Gravenites and keyboardist Barry Goldberg, along with Harvey Brooks, the bassist from the Highway 61 sessions was eventually known as The Electric Flag.

Bloomfield and Goldberg literally stole drummer and singer Buddy Miles from Wilson Pickett’s band. From his description of what he wanted to do, it sounds like Bloomfield had hoped to do what The Band would eventually achieve, blending all forms of American music into a new sound. The Electric

Flag turned out to be an R&B/Soul band with touches of psychedelia, and they were pretty much over before they started. A couple of the horn players were junkies and it wasn’t long before most of the band was also hooked and Buddy Miles turned out to be an egomaniac supreme.

Bloomfield had hoped to sign the band to Atlantic Records so Jerry Wexler could produce them, but possibly because of his earlier contract with John Hammond, they ended up on Columbia. Though there were a few good tracks on it, their debut album, *A Long Time Comin’* did not live up to expectations or the hype. Bloomfield quit the band not long after the album’s release.

If one were to judge Bloomfield by the few bits on film in *Monterey Pop* and *Festival*, where he talks, particularly on the former, where he talks about how groovy the festival was, one could quickly have the impression that he was something of a stoned idiot. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. He was actually an extremely well read intellectual with well-formed opinions of a variety of topics, especially music. I remember hearing him on Murray the K’s radio show on WOR FM in New York, expounding on how incredible Jimi Hendrix was, on how Al Kooper’s Blood Sweat and Tears got the sound he was hoping to get for the Electric Flag (before their album was even out) and how would’ve played “Visions of Johanna” in a totally different way than Robbie Robertson.

Bloomfield was never satisfied with any of the records he made. He didn't like *Highway 61* and thought his playing on the Butterfield albums could have been better. After leaving the Flag, he was involved in various projects that weren't his own. Albert Grossman sent him to oversee the formation of Janis Joplin's Kozmic Blues Band, and he also did some work for Tracy Nelson and Mother Earth and various other sessions. Al Kooper tried to rescue him with the *Super Session* album. However, when Kooper went to knock on the door of Bloomfield's hotel room for the second day of sessions, he found a note from Bloomfield saying he couldn't sleep and had gone home to Marin County. Bloomfield was a lifelong insomniac. This began a long string of shows and sessions Bloomfield didn't show up for rivaling George Jones. When Kooper tried to take the Super Session on the road, Bloomfield played one night at the Fillmore West, which resulted in Bill Graham taking it out on Bloomfield's ex-wife.

Ultimately Bloomfield didn't want any part of being a rock star, and he couldn't stand the adulation that came with being a guitar god. His interest was truly in the music and he was into people like Merle Haggard and George Jones long before it became fashionable. He stopped playing and retreated in his house in Marin County. Eventually some San Francisco musicians held an intervention and Bloomfield's mother got involved, contacting his hero B.B. King who wrote Bloomfield a letter telling him not to squander his considerable talents.

Bloomfield started playing small clubs, often with Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin and other friends, and recording blues albums for small labels. Sometimes he'd do session work and a couple of times he got lured into super session type projects. He also reformed the Electric Flag, finally signing with Atlantic, but it didn't really pan out.

One thing not in the book is that some time in 1974, Bob Dylan visited Bloomfield to play him the songs that would turn out to be *Blood On The Tracks*. Bloomfield was freaked that Dylan wouldn't give him time to learn the songs and also by Dylan's paranoia.

In November, 1980 Maria Muldaur took Dylan at his request to visit Bloomfield again. Dylan was doing a residency at the Warfield Theater in San Francisco, and wanted to invite Bloomfield to play. They had to sneak into his house through a window and Bloomfield appeared to be more interested in the movie he was watching than his guests. Bloomfield did show up and after an elaborate introduction by Dylan, took the stage wearing bedroom slippers. He played on two songs, "The Groom's Still Waiting At The Altar," and "Like A Rolling Stone." The first was eventually

released on the Columbia box set, and the second can be found on bootlegs. It would be his last appearance in a major concert hall.

Three months later an unidentified man was found slumped over the wheel of a battered Mercury on a street in San Francisco. Michael Bloomfield was 37 years old.

Ed Ward tells Bloomfield's story in compelling fashion, often pointing to the great tracks people may not know about. The book includes an extensive discography, organized by date that runs more than 50 pages, and also reprints a *Rolling Stone* interview by Jann Wenner from 1968.

Hovering in the background throughout the book is what could have been.